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### Recollection

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RECOLLECTION

By

REBECCA GEHRES WEED

Bachelor of Arts, Montana State University – Billings, Billings, MT 2006

Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in Painting

The University of Montana  
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Approved by:

Perry Brown, Associate Provost for Graduate Education  
Graduate School

James Bailey, Chair  
School of Art

Anne Wright  
School of Theatre and Dance

Kevin Bell  
School of Art

## Table of Contents

<i>Abstract</i> .....	ii
<i>Image List</i> .....	iv
<i>Introduction</i> .....	1
<i>Past Works</i> .....	7
<i>Discussion</i> .....	13
<i>Process</i> .....	21
<i>Conclusion</i> .....	23
<i>Bibliography</i> .....	24

## Recollection

Chairperson: James Bailey

Recollect is an investigation of personal histories and myths relative to the experience of time and willful manipulation of said time. Depicted in the traditional medium of oil painting an autobiographical account is laid out. Not in chronological order, nor in any sense depicting actual events, these paintings are an attempt to identify and recreate distinguishing factors in my life.

Acquiring a personal mythology is the prerogative of any and all people. History on a global scale has been written and rewritten under the influence of many factors. The factors that cause us to manipulate our own personal pasts are no less significant. Joseph Campbell writes that the myth plays an important role in the development of human kind. One of the reasons for this is the ability to mark time by milestones. Marking time, the understanding of how we personally experience and map time, and the innate desire to do both these things is a matter of survival; biologically and emotionally. The creation of a story (true or false) around events in our lives is no less than an act of self preservation. We are preserving ourselves by creating a context in which we can find our self.

Time is relative to the paintings in terms of content, medium and the participants themselves. Temporal experience with this work constitutes a continuation of the medium as well as an unavoidable acknowledgment that the paintings act as perennial messengers in a visual culture.

## Image List

1. Elizabeth, Nathan and Mathew
2. Maurice Sendak, Where the Wild Things Are
3. Wyoming Landscape
4. Edward Kienholz, State Hospital Interior
5. Swimming Lessons
6. On Making, detail
7. I Hate Pink
8. I Hate Pink, details
9. Gallery View
10. Triage
11. “I Can’t Say I Didn’t know This would Happen”
12. Kept Awake By The Scent of Bubble-Yum, detail
13. Kept Awake By The Scent of Bubble-Yum

## INTRODUCTION

When I was in fourth grade I wrote a poem titled *What If He's A Lie?* The poem was two pages long and detailed Christmas and the arrival of Santa Claus. In my 9-year-old mind it was an ode to my favorite holiday. It was about happiness and the willing suspension of disbelief that occurs around Christmas. The poem was my first foray into lying; or, romanticizing at the very least. Not that Christmas in my house was an unhappy one, but it was not the sparkle filled wonder that I detailed in *What if He's A Lie?*

I wrote the poem at a brief time in my life when I had total faith in my creative impulses. With confidence I convinced my mother to take the poem and me over to the high school. Entering the big airy art room filled with wire and glue was, unbeknownst to me, a change in my own tide. It smelled like paint and mud and the tables were taller than me so that I could only see the undersides. The vision I had was of past generations recorded in ink, gum and carving like cave paintings from another era. The previous confidence I had, that only a 9 year old can have, vanished. I had walked into a world in which I had no context and no currency.

Mr. Terry was in his fifties with a white beard and halo of wiry looking red hair. He looked down at me like I was interrupting his lunch. Which, I probably was. He didn't smile or offer any of the kind words that adults usually give children. He just laid my poem down, handed me a book about collage and started talking about people who can't draw, "Which would be you, right? You can't draw." I didn't say a word the entire time. I just sat shaking and staring at him and his lair. Student artwork, a skeleton and a half,

bags of mysterious powder and a big leaking sink. Mr. Terry's voice carried through the room in way that made clear he lived there. Probably in a hammock in the back with a bottle of something dark and charcoal that made his thick square fingers black. I was in awe.

The poem was cut apart, collaged and bound into a book that I entered in Wyoming's Young Author competition. It won first place. I never saw the poem again. I went back to imagining a life of training small animals and eating candy. I forgot about art and poetry as possibilities for my future.



Elizabeth, Nathan and Mathew

I was raised in a small town in Wyoming. I was the youngest of four siblings. We were all born one right after the other. Because of this our lives overlapped and intertwined and

our identities relied on each other. Forming our own miniature tribe, we not only created memories for ourselves we created memories for our siblings. We became the record of each other's lives. A birthday party for Mat was also the marker for my first lost tooth. Elizabeth's bicycle wreck was imprinted into Nathan's first impressionable visit to a hospital. Our pasts, and certainly futures, were interchangeable, unrecognizable without the others and solid in our minds.

As a young girl Maurice Sendak struck me as a believer in tales. His stories were different in that they did not pander to morals and lessons for children. They did not seem to hold grammatical pointers. Nor did they remind me to never talk to strangers. Quite the opposite, in fact. I read his stories, *Outside, Over There* and *In the Night Kitchen*. I looked at the drawings. I felt like someone, at least, liked children.

As a grown-up I look at those books and the illustrations are what strike me. They are



Maurice Sendak, *Where The Wild Things Are* (Lanes 1998)

dark and foreboding. Even the images of the happy little kids are filled with a kind of impending menace. Mercer Meyer, whose works are so varied and vast, had the same style, a kind of nod to the dangers inherent to children and the role of fantasy as a way to make light of them.



In 1993 my sister died suddenly two days after Christmas. The impact of her departure had many repercussions. The balance of our small tribe shifted and called all of our assumption about family and survival into question. The memories that we had all built around each other and the path that we believed we were all on were called into question.

Joan Didion, in her book *The Year of Magical Thinking*, writes about the roles that siblings play in our lives. They act as a lens through which we see our past (Didion 2005). Without that lens we have to learn to see the past differently. With Elizabeth gone we all had to rewrite our stories. Now the stories include a character that is static in time and memory. Lucky for us we lived in a land that was, and is still, a blank slate, open for interpretation.

The geographical qualities of Wyoming are empty and arid. The horizon line is always available as a point of reference. And, during the winter, which is the majority of the year, the colors of the sky and ground are so similar that the tiniest bird can be the only real texture in the large space.



Wyoming

Looking back I can see the source for my need for tidy space, well aired objects, and strong horizon lines.

The dry emptiness lends itself to feelings that are sinister or melancholy. These feelings are depicted in western landscapes, films and literature. While I do not identify myself with western art I cannot separate myself from the influence of my past. Traditional western paintings were the only art on walls that I saw until much later in life. This could be a detriment. But the romanticism that is apparent in the depictions certainly fed my desire to weave and exaggerate a story until it is beautiful and meaningful. These paintings of the west defined an entire culture. I am still amused by the glorification of the small town I grew up in and know to be quite average. But I also respect the power of the myth that can create such a lasting reputation.

In high school I trailed the halls and classrooms; I lacked any interest in what was going on around me. People had paths and were making decisions. I was hiding out. I found my way to the art annex. It was a massive garage on the edge of campus. I had forgotten about Mr. Terry, poems about Christmas and illustrating. When I arrived on my first day of class I was surprised to see him standing there looking much the same. I was even more surprised that he recognized me. He, of course, made no move to become a friend or ally. Instead he placed in front of me a book about collage, found objects, and art that had happened outside of Wyoming. He turned to a picture of Edward Kienholz.



Edward Kienholz, *State Hospital interior*

“This is good art.” He said. I nodded. I was 16. I thought Norman Rockwell was good. This, *State Hospital*, was mesmerizing. He made it clear that I couldn’t draw and I probably couldn’t pull off “good art” either. Suddenly there was nothing I wanted more than to be an artist.

Despite Mr. Terry’s lack of compassion, or maybe because of it, we became close. He had no time for drama or self pity. And he believed in art. I eventually learned to draw and have not collaged a thing since high school. He remains the most influential person in my life.

I completed my undergraduate degree in Billings Montana, 116 miles from my hometown. Now, living in Missoula, I am 420 miles from home. I have not made any large moves in my life. But I believe it is in the tiny, inconsequential steps that our life changes dramatically.

My emphasis in undergraduate school was in printmaking. I was interested in intaglio, primarily. But as I became more proficient in painting I saw it as a medium in which I could remain more flexible. I received my BA in 2006. After that I felt like I was suddenly allowed to do anything.

## PAST WORKS



*Swimming Lessons*

The work I was doing when I entered the program was centered on the swimming pool as an icon of emotional possibility I swam competitively from the time I was small. I also taught swimming lessons and was a lifeguard for five years. Every summer I would

watch children line up on the side of the pool and overcome their fears. This cycle of insecurities and triumphs played itself out on the side of the pool day in and day out. My siblings were all swimmers as well. Every day my sister and I would climb in and out of the chlorinated water in matching suits. I remember the sensation of swimming alongside her during practices. Her form was just a dark shadow-keeping pace with me amidst the disturbed water.

The pool, for me, is an edifice that is so common but acts as a stage for every kind of emotion. The blank walls, the way the room tends to echo, and the quality of artificial light all seem to represent a setting for something more, perhaps something sinister. The pool itself is a constant cycle of the same water being filtered and chemically treated. It lacks time and the only changes occur because of the people.

I used the pool as a setting in which figures were staged in semi-ambiguous acts. It was important to me to insert the figure in this space as a signal of time and humanity. My paintings were more about the figures and their stories than the space itself. The pool simply provided an impartial setting. Other settings, such as a front door, or a kitchen, have specific societal connotations. A front door is arrival or departure, the kitchen is seen as family, or gender related. These specifics point the viewer in a direction. I wanted there to be ambiguity. The figure is in the midst of an unclear action and the space a place that can mean anything.

The reason I wanted ambiguity is not so much a desire for the viewer to take what they want from it; but, to put them in a place of uncertainty. With that in mind I drew the figures with slight distortions and unreadable facial features. I wanted the viewer to feel

as though there were something menacing under the surface. The image of my sister's shadow swimming along-side comes to mind. It is something that can be reassuring and ominous all at once.

In the painting above, *Swimming Lessons*, I worked from a newspaper clipping from the Cody Enterprise, my hometown newspaper. The clipping was one my mother had kept from my childhood. In it was a picture of me and the kids I grew up with lined up along the pool. I used this image a departure point. In the clipping there were six children. I erased the boy closest to the edge of the pool. The mark that is left is a hint at his presence. The absence of the child is obvious, and it signals a number of possibilities, many of which are disturbing. In all of the pool paintings I included a number that indicates the depth of the pool. This number, in every pool you find, is meant as a safety feature. It alerts the swimmer to their physical limitations. In my paintings it alerts the viewer to what extends beyond the image.

As I moved through these paintings I became aware that I was settling into a pattern. I wanted to break that pattern but keep the basic ideas. I started to think about time. The paintings were a moment in time. They were a story condensed into one permanent image. This permanence is in the material as well as motivation behind painting. The materials are grand. They are archival. By depicting the narrative in a high art medium that is static I was changing something that was a fluid time of my life into a didactic object that was meant to last forever.

My first step was thinking in linear terms. I looked at graphic novels. I looked at the sequential photography of Edward Muybridge. I thought about the banal moments that

happen every day as formative moments. The imagery I came up with was about the simple passing and measuring of time. Or, our temporal experience of passing from one event to the next.

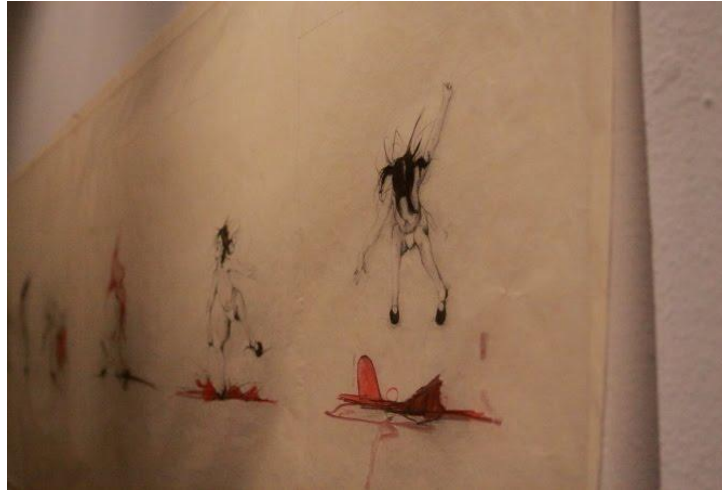
Materials and their meanings became more important to me. I chose long strips of tracing paper for its limited life span, the ability to format long sequences and the transparency.



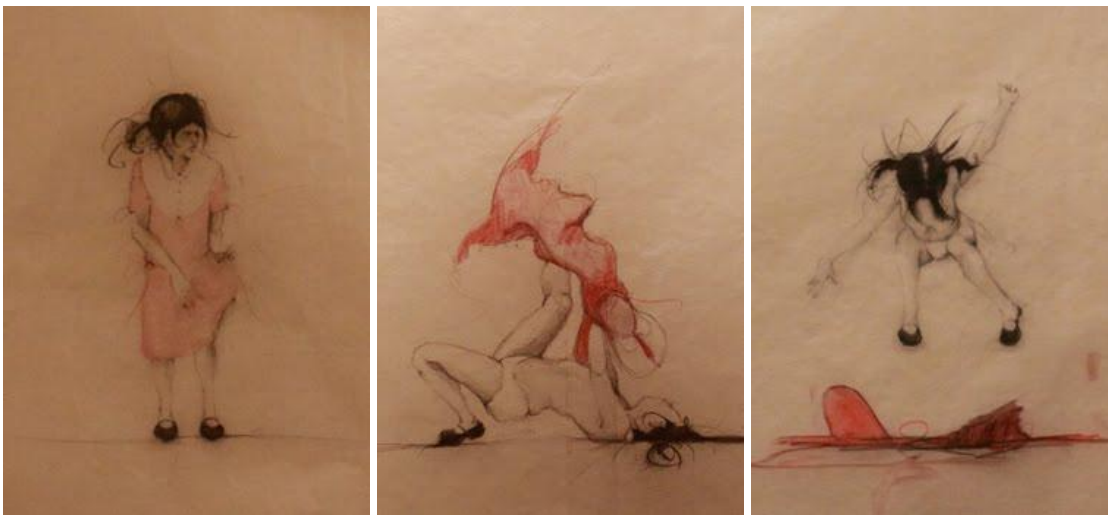
#### *On Making details*

The above images are details from a longer strip. The title *On Making* is reference to my first attempt at creating a physical thing when I was feeling anti-object. The boy depicted is drinking from a bottle and spitting it out repeatedly. I drew from memory. I used only graphite. The figure remained an important aspect of the narrative; although, I did experiment with objects and a dead bird.

I tried to focus on banal moments. I wanted to match the importance of the event with the importance I was placing on materials. Women taking a shower, the lack of change in a recently dead bird, or a child throwing a fit are some examples.



*I Hate Pink*



*I Hate Pink details*

These moments are still from my memory and they tell a story that relates to my past. But they are more about indicating the passing of time and the fact that I am measuring it. The events that occur on a daily basis in every city without causing us to stop and take notice are the small steps that build a day, a week and a year. If we only measured the major occurrences our lives would be condensed into short, albeit dramatic, generations.



The aspect of time and measurement became more enhanced when I followed the suggestions of my faculty, departed from the strict linear format and began to layer images. The relationship between each layer brought focus to the delicate tracing paper as well as the ephemeral quality of the drawings themselves. The movements of the figures was obscured and enhanced at the same time because the inability to see the drawings behind the initial layer brought more attention to their existence.

Despite the simplicity of drawing, both the object and the act are extraordinary. Drawing is flexible. It is about recording, but it also carries the reputation of idleness. Drawings, even when they are finished, have the ability to remain in a state of progression. The relationship between drawing and the passing of time is apparent in the act and medium itself. Drawing out a line has immediacy. It also has the constant potential of becoming something else. (Fisher 2003). A painting requires premeditation, in color choice and preparation. A finished painting is at the end of its potential. It is far more limited in what it can become.

So, of course, I went right back to painting. The sensuous quality of painting, coupled with my renewed interest in autobiographical imagery was what drew me back in. I wanted to explore the ideas behind the creation of family lore. Paintings, being emphatic illustrations that carry importance rather than the ephemeral quality of drawings, were a better choice in medium.



*Gallery View*

## DISCUSSION

My current body of work that is displayed in my thesis exhibit is a continuation of my focus on autobiographical paintings and narrative. In these paintings I am working towards a sense of impending loss or oppression. While these works are autobiographical they are also about the universal aspect of death and disaster. One thing we all share as human beings is the constant prospect of loss. Loss is a broad idea that most of us relate to death. However, the loss of dignity, faith, or our sense of identity factors in this as well. There is a very thin line that separates us from misfortune. While misfortune can simply be a change in weather, it is something that can change our lives forever.

Each of the paintings exhibited represent a memory from my past that I have elaborated on and manipulated into a more romanticized version. The act of turning these stories into family myths is an exploration of identity.

I used both the pool and the bed as anonymous yet emotionally charged spaces. I spoke about the pool in my introduction. The bed is in a similar vein. It is a space we all have in common. But the emotions that beds, sleeping, dreaming and waking up hold for us are specific. The pool and bed are spaces that can be shared and owned at one time. The figures that are represented are signifiers of the roles played and ultimate change within the space.



Triage

*“What then, is time? If no one asks me, I know. If I wish to explain it to someone who asks, I know it not.” St. Augustine, confessions, book II, sec. 14. (Levine 1997)*

Philosophers, physicists, businessmen, and artists alike have devoted thousands upon thousands of words and hours to defining time. In the end, time can be defined in numerous ways and each definition applies to distinct parts of our lives. Having a memory is the temporal experience of history. The cause and effect, one thing follows another, process of time passing. This is physics. Stephen Hawking explains this version of time very simply as entropy distinguishing the past from the future. Entropy creates an “arrow if time” (Hawking 1988), it gives direction to time. Entropy is disorder. In a fixed system (our physical lives) disorder happens and you cannot undo it. You can’t un-ring a bell, as they say.

Our own individual paths of disorder are evident on our physical bodies. We watch ourselves grow in awkward spurts, and then watch ourselves deplete in even more dismaying ways. The magic, though, of memories and the freedom to transform our memories, is that we can conjure up images that retain the gleam of previous times. The figures in my paintings are forever depicted in their perfect imperfections. The vague numbers and marking and left over mistakes from the actual process of painting are symbolic of this physical change. That these changes happen in pools and beds, static and imaginary spaces, is presenting the way in which we experience the past.

The paintings themselves are physical manifestations of time. The process of creating them is evident simply by their existence. (You can’t un-paint a painting?) The imagery depicts past and present as memory and the act of having a memory.



*“I Can't Say I Didn't Know... “*

*Elizabeth pulled herself onto the bed. One hand grasped at the green chenille cover and the other a pair of scissors. She rolled until she was in the center of the bed; her white nightgown pulling against the Velcro like nubs. The tiny girl seated on the pillow gazed wearily at the sharp end of the scissors. The black handles were too big for Elizabeth's fingers. The silver tips stabbed into the blanket.*

*“What are those for?” the girl asked.*

*“We are going to see.” Elizabeth said.*

*She sat up, her back perfectly erect, and waved the tool in the air. There was no light in the room and the ceiling was very high. Though the door to the bedroom was open the*

*block of light didn't seem to penetrate the room. The green bed was afloat in the darkness and the tiny girl stretched a toe towards the edge. She could hear talking and low laughing from the rest of the house. She heard one of her brothers running water. It was all so far away at the moment.*

*"Maybe I should get Cindy. Maybe she should see, too."*

*"We'll tell her later."*

*The tiny girl nodded and sat up as though prepared to participate. Elizabeth took a strand of her own hair and snipped a bit at the end. The scissors were huge compared to her head and her hand shook. She snipped off a larger piece. And then cut off the whole curl right to the scalp. She looked at the red strands sticking to her fingers. Looking satisfied she picked out bigger mass of hair and began in the middle. In a few moments she had cut off nearly all of her hair. The few remaining curls she chopped off in one vicious sounding swipe.*

*The hair lay around her little body in a half circle. Some of it was still falling slowly through the air. It did not seem to want to settle. Long red coils formed shapes around her toes. The finer wisps stuck to her knees and shoulder. They stuck to the blanket and the tiny girl at the head of the bed.*

*"Do you know that I am a fortune teller?" Elizabeth asked*

*"No."*

*Elizabeth bent her head down over the strands. Her scalp peeked through the left over patches of red. Her bony shoulders shivered. She plucked out the topmost lock that had formed a perfect circle and touched it to her bald head.*

*“Do you want to know the future?” Elizabeth whispered. Now she sounded scared.*

*“No.”*

*“Good, I can’t tell you this anyway.”*

The above story is an example of the story I built around actual facts and this painting. In 1983 Elizabeth did, in fact, crawl into bed with a pair of scissors and proceed to cut off all of her hair. I was in the bed with her; however, my recollection is so murky that I questioned whether or not that actually happened. Family members who were present the night of the doomed hair cut have verified my memory. Their own details are somewhat fuzzy, so, I can only surmise that it was a spontaneous act of rebellion from a four year old.

This particular story from my sister’s childhood is absurd and still goes unexplained. As it rolled around in my head I wanted to make sense of it. But I also wanted to blow it up, like a photograph, so that I could see it better. Or, maybe, so that it would mean more. I recast Elizabeth as the oracle or the prophet and I am the witness. The role of the oracle was important to me as act of measuring the future rather than the past.

Measuring our physical bodies and geographical location as evidence of our existence is my departure point. In this instance I was looking at the ways in which cultures have, almost desperately, tried to measure the future. For instance, I look at the length of my hair, measure the length of time since I last cut it, ponder the idea that it has grown x amount of inches in x amount of time and, my god, what else about me has changed...? But, what if I looked at the length of the line down the center of my palm and was able to

gauge what was in store for me? The marriage of existential crisis and counting (anything) goes both backwards and forwards.

The importance of measuring and counting the physical evidence of our development is universal. But for me it is a way of locating myself in society. It is a survival mechanism that I use to remind myself of the past as well as the ever present future. It is necessary to be aware of the passing of time. On a biological level it reminds us of what we need to do next. On a psychological level it maintains our identities and self knowledge. To count backwards is reverential. To count forwards, as in divination, is preparation and power.

There are various methods of divination. Sortilege is divination through the shapes made by everyday objects. Usually it involves tossing runes, bones or entrails. In this painting the oracle has removed her hair and reads the shapes made by the strands. The title, *I Can't Say I Didn't Know This Would Happen*, references both the act of seeing the future and the childishness behind my own desire to believe that this could have been possible. I want to give depth and breadth and a touch of the mystical to these memories, but I also want to acknowledge the desperation behind the motive.

In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* Joseph Campbell writes that myth and our psyches are intertwined. The difference, according Campbell, between myth and our dreams is that the myth is consciously controlled and universal. When we dream we are not controlling the plot, but our subconscious is fulfilling fantasies. The myth is a corporeal manifestation of these dreams. Campbell describes myth as “symptoms of the unconscious (as indeed are all human acts and thoughts) but also controlled statements...” (Campbell 1988). Myths that have been passed down for millennia were



thoroughly discussed and manipulated to prescribe certain spiritual concepts. My paintings are a smaller scale version of this control. While I am not planning on presenting these stories as massive directives, I am manipulating the stories of my past to shape my identity.

Ana Mendieta is an artist to whom I give a nod when I am working out my own reasons for transforming my past. She worked from the standpoint of a woman without a solid identity. Her work retraced paths that might lead her to this identity. My work is indeed personal. But Mendieta's self portraits are absolute manifestations of her physical self. Within the boundaries she created she manages to explore a number of possible archetypes to guide her past and future.

Within the smallest family to the world at large we each are limited to specific things. Whether it is our gender or our talents we have a role that we play. Myths depict the various roles that have been played out and the consequences or rewards that result. Present day technology allows us to create our own roles via Facebook, MySpace, blogging, or personal web sites. But the tradition of discovering these roles through ritual and legend has dissipated. The natural turning points in our lives are not celebrated as growth and gain, but in terms of societal convenience. This could be one of the reasons a search for individual identity has become the standard.

Working autobiographically, in my case, is about identity as location and experience. I look to my past and memories as proof of my existence. The memory that I land on as an important event may be the most commonplace midwestern incident, or something truly unique. Either way, I place the characters in roles, and look for the value behind that role.

Hence, my sister is the young oracle. Of course, that also means that I am the main character more often than not. Many of my paintings could be called self-portraits.



*Kept Awake By the Scent of Bubble-Yum detail*

Purposefully changing a memory from your past is, obviously, quite different from the natural evolution of that memory over time. When a person dies, they stay fixed. Memories of them can be spun into tall tales and their role in the story is never compromised by the living figure's failures. In this way the stories are like eulogies. The relationship that is left between a living person and the dead is also a fixed thing. In *Kept*

*Awake by the Scent of Bubble-Yum* I wanted to write a eulogy about a relationship rather than a person.



*Kept Awake By the Scent of Bubble-Yum*

I placed a mother and a child in a bunk bed together; this keeps them linked, but divided. The child is posed in a way that I hope conveys that she is laid to rest. She not only represents physical death but also the figurative death of the tie between her and her mother. In the top bunk the mother is making a gesture. It could be a blessing. It is also the American Sign Language sign for favorite.

I chose a bunk bed because of the obvious reference to childhood.

There is a link between this painting and the image I included of Edward Kienholz *State Asylum* interior. I imagined that the men were dreaming each other's dreams and that the bunk bed facilitated this. In *Kept Awake by the Scent of Bubble-Yum*, a connection between mother and child is kept in place by their strange proximity. I did not paint them in an embrace, or other common familial pose. I wanted to suggest tension within the boundaries of unconditional love.

In the preceding two paintings and the remainder of my thesis work I have tried to suggest feelings of loss and separation (from society and identity). The work is based on my own memories that I have rewritten into family myths. Using personal symbols from my past, hints at measurement and emotionally undefined spaces I have completed this series of narratives for my thesis exhibit. I hope to continue figurative painting beyond this exhibit. However, this series is a completion of my current research

## PROCESS AND MEDIUM

In 1991 Albert Oehlen participated in an interview with a German publication. At the time he was painting in what he termed a “post-non representational art”. When asked why he chose painting over other media he said,

“The main reason why I made the decision to paint is that I think it is the real centre of art. And to pursue formally new directions- video, or performance art, or whatever- or to do nothing at all, would only limit one’s expressive options. It would all be overshadowed by the technical issues, by the novelty...If formal considerations become too powerful, this only distract from you want to say substantially...” (Oehlen 1993)

The clearest means of investigating my past memories was, to me, through illustrating them. Painting is not only a seductive process. It also has tradition behind it as a means of communication. While I feel that I still have a lot to explore in simple drawn images on tracing paper, I also feel that Oehlen is right is saying that the novelty of the materials could cloud the intent.

The intent to illustrate a story, ambiguous as it may be.

## CONCLUSION

My individual experience of time is condensed into these stories. The paintings serve as objects in a presentation of authenticity and experience. They also serve as messengers

that continue to elaborate on the condition each of us live with. That condition being time and the desire to affect it.

There is a strong history behind autobiographical work. It is arguable that all artists are referencing themselves in a way. Because a strong motive behind creating art is to seek out our tribe and present our archetypes, we are all creating our own myths. I hope that my search into my past and transforming it can be translated as such.

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